Chomsky's Concept of Media

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Professor of linguistics, writer and political activist Noam Chomsky has given us insight of how to look at media and propaganda. From a critical point of view, he has written a large number of articles and several books dealing with the issues of propaganda, representation and how the media works. His books *Manufacturing Consent* and *Media Control* are widely consulted to learn about his concept of media.

To grasp his idea of media, one needs to keep in mind two models of democracy. In the first model, "the public has means to participate in some meaningful way in the management of their own affairs and the means of information are open and free" (*Media Control*, p. 9). In other words, the public are free to express their opinion and the media is providing a platform to the public to express their opinions. Put differently, the media represents the views of the common man and it brings to the government the public's concerns and issues. In the second model of democracy, the ruling establishment tries to control the flow of information; because they fear the assertion from the below. The media, in the second model of democratic society, acts in complicity with the ruling establishment and the state. Instead of expressing the aspiration of the common masses, it is a tool in the hands of the ruling establishment to control the thought processes of the common people. The media, instead of debating and discussing issues freely, tries to suppress information and manufactures the consent, keeping in view the interests of the government and the business classes. In the words of Chomsky: "An alternative conception of democracy is that the public must be barred from managing of their own affairs and the means of information must be kept narrowly and rigidly controlled" (ibid, p. 10).

Which model of the democratic society are we living in India? Most of the people would agree that Indian society, particularly under the current regime, reflects the second model of democratic society where the media is in collusion with the establishment. Instead of facilitating the free flow of information and raising critical issues, the media is deflecting people's attention away from the core issues. In his book *Media Control*, Chomsky gives a similar example of the American society in the early twentieth century when the media and the public relation department of the state were spreading propaganda and creating/manufacturing public opinion in favour of the state and the business classes. At that time, the USA was under the administration of Woodrow Wilson, who was elected the president in 1916. The people of the USA were, according to

Chomsky, were pacifists at that time and they were not interested in participating in the First World War. Contrary to the public opinion, "The Wilson administration was actually committed to war and had to do something about it. They established a government propaganda commission, called the Creel Commission, which succeeded, within six months, in turning a pacifist population into a hysterical, war-mongering population which wanted to destroy everything German, tear the Germans limb from limb, go to war and save the world. That was a major achievement, and it led to a further achievement. Right at that time and after the war the same techniques were used to whip up a hysterical Red Scare, as it was called, which succeeded pretty much in destroying unions, and eliminating such dangerous problems as freedom and the press and freedom of political thought. There was very strong support from the media, from the business establishment, which in fact organized, pushed much of this work, and it was, in general, a great success" (ibid, p. 12).

What Chomsky is stressing here is the role of the propaganda machinery. The state public relation department, the business establishment and the media all acted in collaboration. The media cares least about what people think and what is democratic and ethical; it pliantly acts to suppress people's aspiration. Moreover, the media spread propaganda and installed in the minds of the people the state and business establishment's interests and their own interests. What is happening in India today is not much different from the American society of the Wilson administration. In India too, the media is downplaying, ignoring and suppressing people's concerns. With the help of the propaganda, the public is misguided. The issues related to economy, health, education and their social welfare are being replaced by communal issues. The issues of farmers and workers are ignored and they are replaced by Hindu-Muslim conflicts. The failing economy, agrarian crisis and massive unemployment are replaced by the conjured up of threat from across the borders. People dying of hunger and starvation do not become news, while a minor firing at the borders become the national news and they are debated for long time. Laths of farmers committing suicides are neglected, while a suicide by a young film star is debated for over months and media is working as investigating agency as well as court in their news shows.

To put it differently, media, instead of allowing free flow of information, is working as a tool in the hands of the state and the business classes. Critical discussions have been replaced by propaganda and lies. The media, instead of working as a pillar of democracy, is spreading reactionary ideas and is busy in making profits.

Linked to this is the ruling establishment's anxiety about the upsurge from the below. Simply speaking, the government and the business establishment have always looked at the common people with suspicion. While democracy is claimed and propagated as the rule of people and by the people, the hard reality is that the ruling establishment has always tried to take back or withdraw the rights of people through direct and indirect means. For example, Indian Constitution gives constitutional protection to the freedom of expression. A person is free to express her opinion and critique the policies of the government. In one sense, this is a very revolutionary provision. But the ruling establishment has also put several constrains in the path of a person to express herself freely. For example, a person will be stopped and even punished for expressing her opinion that is causing social tension and attacking the sovereignty of the state. We all know that the state machinery is invested with the power to subjectively decide what constitutes the violation of peace and the sovereignty. Take the example of the 2020 Delhi riots, those who were responsible for inciting violence by giving inflammatory and communal speeches have been given all protections by the police, while the peaceful protestors against communal Citizenship Amendment Act are being harassed, jailed and charged with seditious and anti-terrorist cases. Even a public university, the student leaders who are critiquing the government for its communal policies and pro-corporate agendas are being arrested on the charges of sedition. With the help of the media propaganda, the activists and civil society members are being demonized as "anti-national". In this way, their legitimate critique and their right to free speech are curtailed with the help of state machinery and propaganda machine. While the common masses are seen as "the bewildered herd" and projected as a "threat", the media and the state-backed intellectuals are hailed as "legitimate" voices. In other words, the common masses have been reduced to "the spectators" of democracy, and the news anchors, reporters and editors of the newspapers are manufacturing the

consent and constantly building up legitimacy for the delegitimized system. This is nothing but a farce of democracy that is being sold as the best system of government in the world. Note that Chomsky is critical of both liberal intellectuals as well the top party leaders of the communist regimes for considering the public as "bewildered herd" incapable of thinking and taking "right" decision.

In Chomsky's idea of media, propaganda is playing a key role in manufacturing consent and legitimacy. That is why he asks us to "turn to the techniques propaganda". It is because "propaganda is to a democracy what is bludgeon is to totalitarian state. That's wise and good because, again, the common interests clued the bewildered herd. They can't figure them out".

That is why the public relations figure prominently in Chomsky's idea of media. He knows it very well that the opinions are often "engineered" and people are made to believe the interest of the ruling establishment as their own interest. Giving the example of the US public relations department, he says that "the United States pioneered the public relations industry. Its commitment was 'to control the public mind', as its leaders put it. They learned a lot from the successes of the Creel Commission and the successes in creating the Red Scare and its aftermath. The public relations industry underwent a huge expansion at that time. It succeeded for some time in creating almost total subordination of the public to business rule through the 1920s". In other words, "public relations is a huge industry. They're spending by now something on the order of a billion dollar in a year. All along its commitment was to *controlling the public mind*" (ibid pp. 22-23).

With the success of the propaganda machinery, the ruling establishment in the USA was able to change the public opinion. The interests of the company owners and those of the workers sweeping the floor there were presented as identical. Even the public opinions were engineered and they were turned against the striking workers. Similar examples are also seen in India when the journalists, instead of listening to the demands of the workers on strike, are more interested in showing how much inconvenience and loss of the country's resources have been made by the strikes. Thus, the journalists are not reporting the grievances of the workers; instead, they do their best to demonize the strikers. Similarly, when the Prime Minister goes to perform ground breaking ceremony of the Ram Temple, the media does not raise a single point that a public officer should not associate himself in public view with any religion. Instead, the media presents the prime minister as giving a message of peace and brotherhood and earning fame for the country. One does not understand how could the PM associating with a religious ceremony and appeasing the majoritarian sentiments act as the ambassador of peace and national unity? Similarly, when the national economy goes down and the youth protest against unemployment, the media shows the threat to the unity of the nation coming from across the border. When the opposition leaders ask the government to go for further discussion on the controversial Farm bills, the media comes in to regard them unruly and doing petty politics.

One of the reasons why the media does not reflect the sentiments of the public is its corporate character. Most of the big media houses are being owned by the big corporate players both in the USA and India. In other words, the opinions are being engineered by the corporate players by investing money in media. Chomsky does not mince any words to say that "the media are a corporate monopoly" (ibid, p. 29).

In his widely cited book *Manufacturing Consent* (co-author Edward S. Herman) Chomsky, attempts "to explain the performance of the U.S. media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate" (p. xi.). Here he argues that media serve powerful societal interests that control and finance them. He says that "it is our view that, among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them" (p. xi.).

How to address the issue? On this Chomsky underlines an urgent need to democratise media as "democratic politics requires a democratization of information sources and a more democratic media". How to democratise media? He says that to achieve this objective "grassroots movements" and alternative media represented by "large numbers of ordinary citizens". Thus, he underscores the need to have "non-profit community-based broadcasting stations and networks, and a better use of public-access channels, the Internet, and independent print media" (p. xlix). ■

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